

Childcare in Louisville: A Crisis We Can Solve

Nearly 15% of Louisville's childcare providers have permanently shut their doors since the pandemic and many more are at risk of closure. Childcare providers, from centers to in-home daycares, are struggling to find workers, especially reliable, well-trained workers, to keep classes open. One of the biggest contributors to this is the chronic underpayment of childcare workers. The average wage for childcare workers in Louisville is \$9.78/hour. I'll let you read that again. The average hourly wage for the people caring for our children in this city is \$9.78/hour.

We also know that wage supplements to support the childcare workforce is not only a policy intervention that has been well-proven to promote employee recruitment and retention in the childcare workforce generally, it is a strategy that numerous states are employing with their own ARP funds.

Without wage supplementation, our childcare workforce will lose out on critical state and federal match opportunities. The Kentucky Department of Child Care is offering centers an additional 10% in childcare stabilization payments for centers paying at least \$10.00/hr. and 20% for those paying \$13.00/hr. A \$9.4 million investment from our city can unlock \$107 million in total stabilization funding—An ELEVENfold return. Without those investments, we would be leaving cash on the table that could keep hundreds of providers in the industry and thousands of children in care this year. For every childcare position we can recruit or retain, that opens an average of 6-10 care slots for children under the age of 5. Ensuring that there is a workforce able to safely care for children while their parents and caregivers are at work would be enough to justify the investment. Too many caregivers are still unable to rejoin the workforce because they cannot find safe, affordable childcare. But we also know the longterm benefits of having high-quality, child-development-centered instruction for children under the age of 5 pays dividends years later: from college and workforce readiness to reduced criminal justice involvement

Many states, from North Carolina to Oklahoma to Tennessee, have employed this strategy for several years with success. Considering that premium pay for Metro employees is being used for retention and vaccination incentive, it only makes sense to use this for an industry that has faced as many or more challenges recruiting and retaining critical workers.

We also need to recognize that childcare work requires some of the highest skills for the lowest pay. One of the only analogous careers would be certified nursing assistants, another undervalued caring career that we rely on to serve our most vulnerable community members. Even many CNAs have higher wages because of the greater number of third-party payers in their system. The minimum standards to operate a childcare facility and work in the field, from nutrition to safe sleep to fire safety are hundreds of pages long. And that is before any consideration about actual instruction and enrichment for children is considered. Our society's failure to adequately compensate workers has been a crisis in the making for decades because of our chronic undervaluing of the labor of women, particularly women of color, providing these skills.

We, as a community, treat childcare issues as a family, and more specifically a mother's, concern, rather than the critical infrastructure that we need to operate a thriving community. That is why the costs are borne almost entirely at a family level, even though society reaps the rewards of having an available workforce currently, and a well-educated, socially-aware generation to follow. Passing the costs to individual families, who are often in their earliest earning years, instead of investing in early learning and childcare as the community good it is, is a mistake that we have the opportunity to correct right now. Families cannot afford to bear the full cost of industry-competitive wages. We need to step up.